

Architectural Conservation

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DESIGN IN THE HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT

With few exceptions, the character of cities have changed over time with the architectural styles fashionable in each period as well as the changing demands for their functionality. They have prospered and grown in times of affluence and made do in times of economic depression. New architectural styles and materials are often introduced into the city initially on the periphery and then in empty plots or as replacements for dilapidated buildings. Sometimes, existing buildings are adapted to the new styles. It is very rare that a place has a historic or period unity. Most often, the character is a combination of styles and it is important that this evolution is maintained and the vitality of places can be continued.

Today's architecture is the heritage of tomorrow and another layer in the complex tapestry that makes up the character and identity of cities. One of the objectives of the programme developed for the City of Rotterdam in the Netherlands, to celebrate its designation as 'European Cultural Capital, 2001' was to build 'the future heritage'. New architecture in an existing setting will set out to copy, mimic, integrate, harmonise with, contrast, juxtapose on or even compete with the existing context. Each situation may necessitate a different approach. This section will discuss some of the approaches to design in the historic environment. Above all, it is important to recognise that the most successful architecture is often where the context of the existing environment has been fully understood by the design team.

The context of townscape

An understanding of townscape will inform the conservation and reuse of the existing fabric and new developments and infill within it. Analyses of the townscape are not limited character studies of facades or simply a case of recording typical building materials, styles and detailing. In depth, the understanding of a townscape includes everything from its historic evolution and morphology to the integrity of its various elements. Urban character needs to be seen as a totality, including:

- Urban composition, streets, junctions, the treatment of corners, open spaces, massing, buildings' heights and their relationship to each other;
- Historic evolution and morphology, how has the urban form developed;
- Land use patterns, green spaces and the relationship of different uses to one another;
- Materials used and their regional relevance, how they are used and how they fit together;
- Common typologies relating to components such as openings, roofs and chimneys.



Figure 8.9 The character of these souks in the old town of Jerusalem might be defined as a combination of the architecture, the textures, the play of light and shadow and the deliberately broken vistas, as well as the ongoing imprint of human habitation.

The layout and vistas, sometimes incidental, sometimes considered and others specifically designed, such as model villages or garden suburbs. Furthermore, many monuments, buildings and squares are often designed to be viewed from a certain angle or approach and these perspectives should be respected when alterations are proposed.

Beyond its architectural and town planning attributes, townscape has social, cultural and psychological significance (Figure 8.9). It is an understanding of this asset that is fundamental to successful urban conservation and regeneration projects. In the contemporary city, historic quarters represent a tension between character, aesthetic values and a sense of attachment against economic pressures for development and increases in land value (Figure 8.10). Many historic urban areas are now occupied by people who have no significant past connection to the place, yet there is often a greater sense of attachment to a place of historic character, even when the inhabitants are not associated with that past.

Architectural interventions

New architecture is added to the existing fabric of a city in a number of ways, including:

- New additions or extensions to historic buildings;
- New buildings within gutted interiors or behind retained facades;

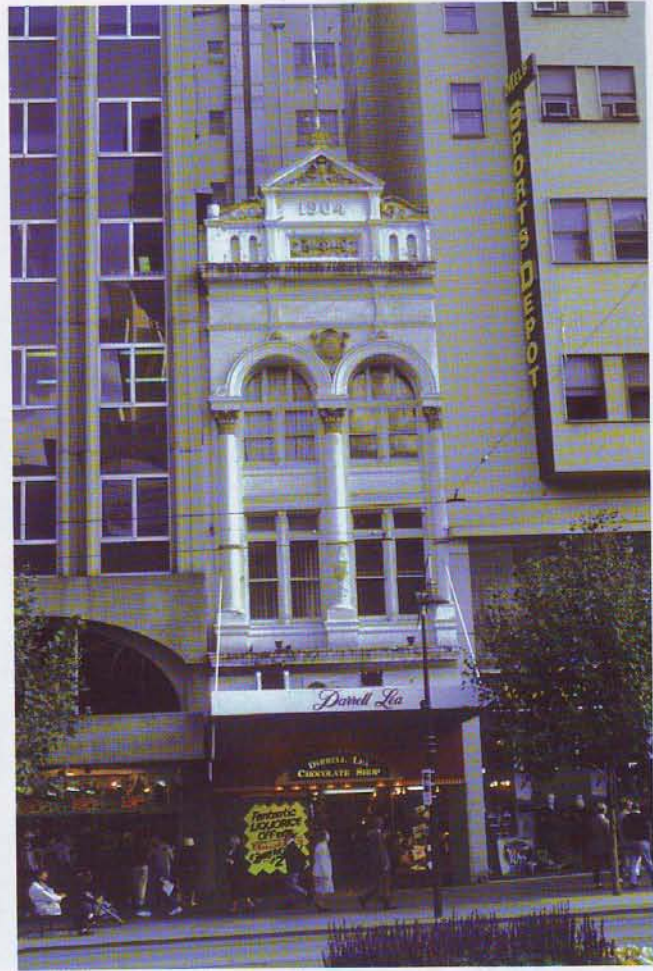


Figure 8.10 A historic building continues to exist sandwiched between two larger scale modern buildings in Melbourne, Australia.

- New buildings on empty plots or as replacements for existing buildings (infill);
- Larger developments adjoining historic areas or impacting on their value and character;
- Urban design and townscape improvements.

The immediate considerations for most designers and for planners, who will approve a scheme, will be the external appearance and whether it will mimic the historic or stand out as unequivocally contemporary (Figure 8.11). Neither of these two approaches is necessarily appropriate to each situation and between the two extremes lie a multitude of solutions. Copying the historic, or pastiche, is not authentic or truthful and there is rarely a reason for it, although there are exceptions. On the other hand, a design that is unequivocally of its time will come to be seen as distinctively 'of its time'; the passing of time has not necessarily been kind to many of the bland modernist infill developments of the 1950s and 1960s.

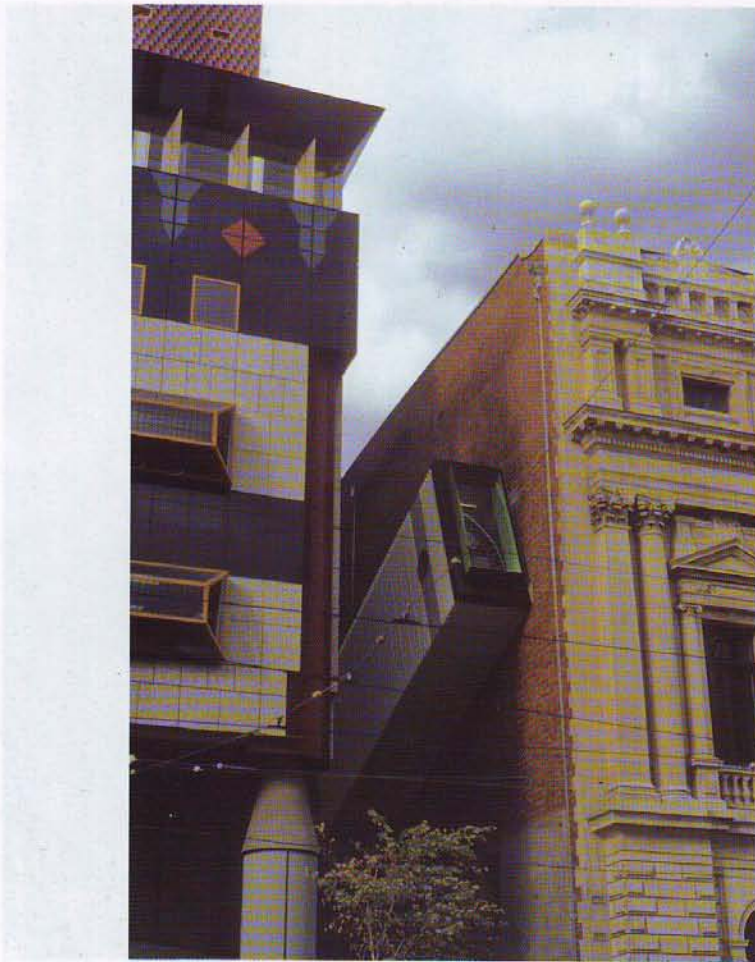


Figure 8.11 A new building in deliberate contrast with a historic building in Melbourne, Australia.

Setting in context

'The conservation of a monument implies preserving a setting which is not out of scale. Wherever the traditional setting exists, it must be kept. No new construction, demolition or modification which would alter the relations of mass and colour must be allowed' (Article 6, The Venice Charter).

New design might involve an extension to a large and significant historic building or a small historic building, a new building in a historic urban environment or a new structure at an archaeological site such as a visitor centre or shelter to protect the ruins. Proposed new additions should be of a quality that will constitute a valuable contribution to the historic building, its setting and the townscape. Alterations and additions should relate to the scale and the proportions of the building and be harmonious with it. Furthermore, the interrelationships that are an integral part of the understanding of the building and its immediate environment should not be compromised (Figure 8.12). In each case, different issues will need to be resolved. An initial consideration must be the impact on the integrity of the whole and the intended setting of the historic building, followed by the technical considerations of a new building

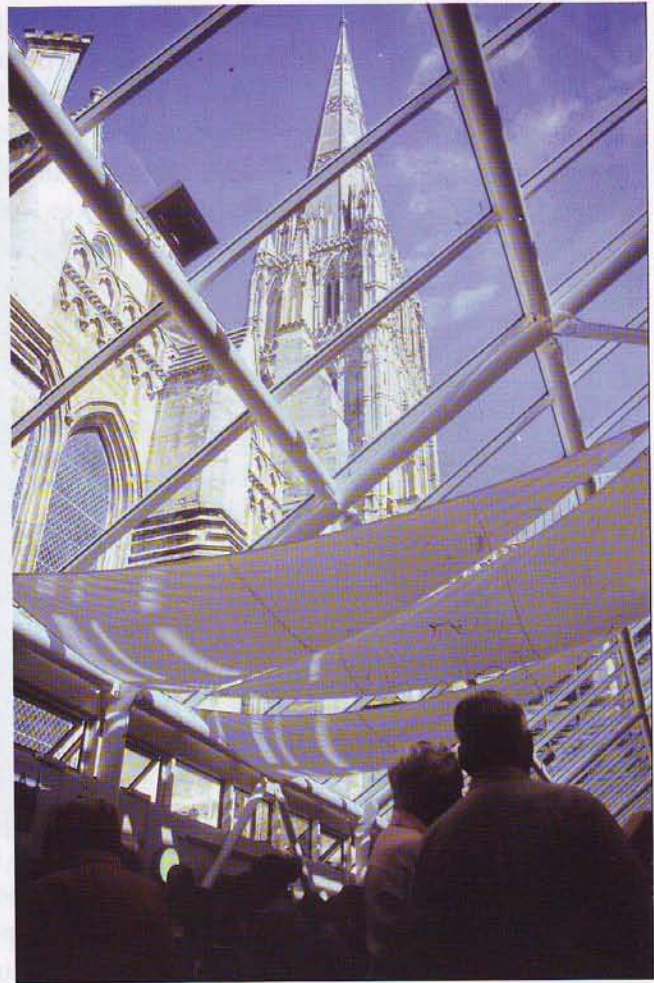


Figure 8.12 The glass roof of a new shop inserted between the Cathedral and its cloisters at Salisbury, England, provides a stunning view of the Cathedral spire.

being placed in close proximity to a historic structure, from foundations to the detailing of joints between the old and new material (Figure 8.14).

In some cases, local or regional planning authorities publish design guides (see also Chapter 4). Design guides vary considerably in content and in direction, in the narrow sense they appear as a style guide. Where they have been thought through they form a robust development framework. Such guides need to clearly differentiate between conservation, additions and new-build projects. They will often provide useful guidelines on building materials typical to the area and therefore of the local character. Many make recommendations for new buildings to use local materials, and in some cases provide a selection of typical local details. This is not necessarily a solution to good architecture. The requirements of a new building are not the same as old buildings and it is important that current needs are also being responded to through appropriate technologies and designs. Furthermore, in some places building materials that were once easily available and affordable may no longer be readily available, especially in the case of timber and stone. The use of artificial variants, however, is rarely a solution to maintaining 'character'.

Any new design should be based on a thorough understanding of the historic building itself and of the townscape or landscape in which it will be situated. This involves not only an analysis of elevation treatments and use of materials, but requires a deeper understanding of their significance and the basis of the original design decisions. When a new building is placed in a street or square there may already exist a collection of buildings of very different styles. It may, therefore, not simply be adjoining buildings from which allegiances are sought. On the contrary, the design process must go beyond this, to look at urban development and how these streets or squares were formed, to understand the design principles/ethos of the place, the greater whole. The scale, massing and height of any new building should not overshadow surrounding historic buildings or detract from the appreciation of established views and open spaces.

With greater demand on land for building, previously empty plots or those that have become empty for various reasons can be prime sites for infill developments. Placing new buildings into spaces that have previously been open spaces, such as many of the extensions to Oxford and Cambridge colleges, will not only introduce new densities but also alter the way spaces around buildings are used and the existing buildings perceived in their setting. Although new volumes into the grain of a historic centre can have more impact than the elevations, this type of development may be necessary to ensure the ongoing vitality of a place.

Smaller interventions into light wells and the like can often solve complex circulation problems as well as accommodate newer needs for lifts and additional staircases. Covering previously open inner courtyards with glass roofs provides the opportunity for otherwise underused or redundant space to become more efficiently used while maintaining light levels into the building (Figure 8.12). In the case of the British Museum in London, the opening up of the courtyard has enabled the introduction of a whole new circulation hub and eased the pressure on other congested areas. While these interventions are not highly visible on the exterior of a historic building or in the townscape, considerations need to be made regarding the impact of the changed environmental conditions on the historic fabric as well as structural support of the new roof structure. In some cases, it has been possible to build off existing walls; in other cases, a new structure has been inserted into the courtyard space to support the new roof.

Another approach commonly seen in contextualising new buildings has been the use of glass either for its transparent or reflective qualities. There is an often misguided perception that an elevation clad in glass is transparent and therefore less obstructive in a townscape, yet unintended reflections and glare on the glass may result in a different townscape experience. At the same time, at night when lights are on these buildings can become see-through. In other instances, glass is deliberately used for its reflective properties, in order to fit into the surrounding historic townscape by reflecting it.



Figure 8.13 The extension to the National Gallery in London by Venturi Scott-Brown, where elements of the existing building have been sequentially simplified on the front elevation of the new building.

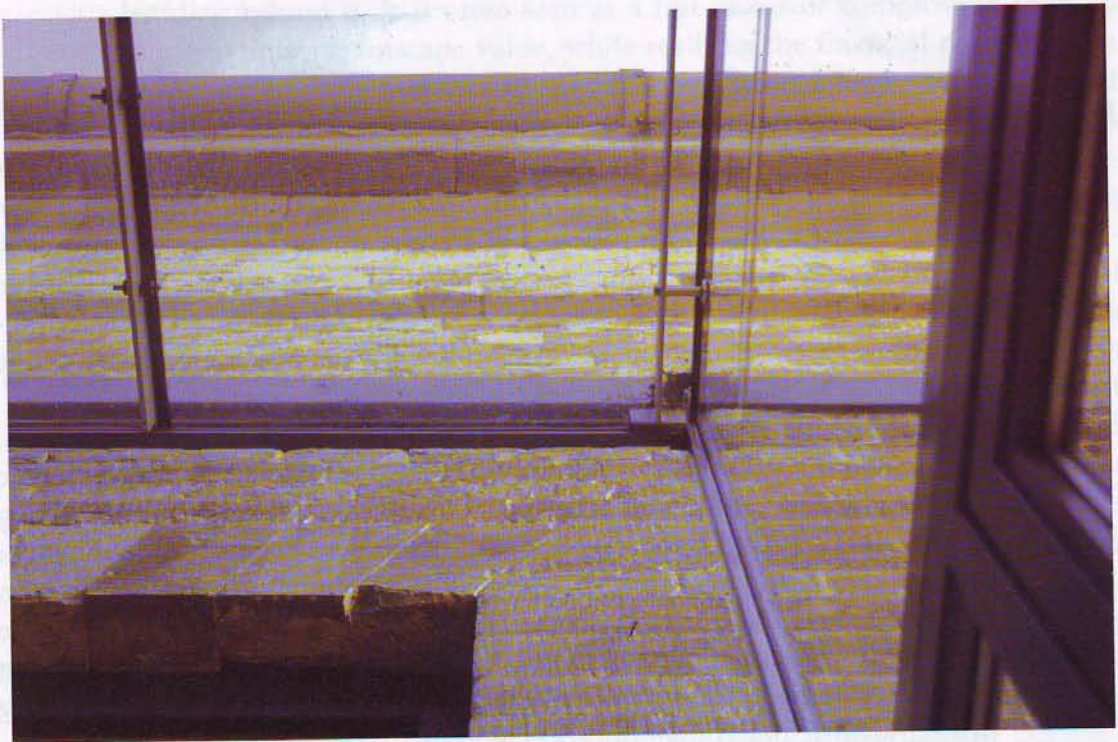


Figure 8.14 A carefully considered detail between the existing building and new extension at Compton Verney by Stanton Williams Architects.



Figure 8.15 This new development in London's Spitalfields mimics historic styles in an attempt to fit in with the mixed grain of eighteenth century buildings on the other side of the street.

Historicist and pastiche approaches

It was noted above that the morphological growth of a city is the layers of new styles that are introduced in each period. Thus, the introduction of historicist interventions, often in the name of aesthetic conformity, will not necessarily enhance a townscape. One of the arguments put forward in support of rebuilding the demolished royal palace on Berlin's Unter der Linden Avenue (see Chapter 2) was to re-establish the historic integrity of the Avenue.

The principle of minimum intervention should also apply to townscapes, rather than over restoration of facades to perfect frontages. Period-specific authenticity can only be achieved in open air museums, not in the living dynamic of the city. The recreation of a historic elevation or the building of a new building using historic stylistic precedents is often seen as a safe option for infill developments. It is very rare that the design of a pastiche façade has fully considered the historic precedent, its use of materials, their detailing and their proportions. Pastiche buildings often have a tendency of appearing neither historic nor contemporary (Figure 8.15).



Figure 8.16 Architects such as Carlos Scarpa have demonstrated how thoroughly modern materials and details can successfully be incorporated into historic buildings.

Facadism

Facadism is the practice of retaining a historic façade, but constructing a new building behind it. It is often seen as a last resort or compromise solution to maintaining townscape value, while realising the financial potential of a prime site. In some cases, facadism might also refer to the re-construction of a facsimile of the old elevation.

Façade retention, however, is not an equivalent of conservation. The elevation of a building is an expression of the interior and its organisation; elevations are only part of the building, they do not alone represent its integrity. With the loss of a back or interior some of the intrinsic character of the original building will also be permanently lost. While a façade contributes to streetscape character, vistas and views, the building as a whole makes up urban grain, morphology, volume and density. Facadism becomes a way of only looking at external appearances rather than at the totality of an urban area and some more intrinsic qualities, such as community and social values of a place. Changes to the volume and layout of a building not only introduces different uses to an area, but may also bring about morphological changes altering block sizes and density.

Nonetheless, the market favours the historic exterior and the character it adds to a square or street frontage for example, while at the same time demanding or paying a higher premium to the new interior or back. Furthermore, in some instances an elevation might have been specifically designed

to contribute a streetscape or square, rather than as an expression of the buildings function. In such an instance, its maintenance is integral to urban conservation.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Historic buildings can play a vital role in regeneration by recognising the added value of cultural heritage to revitalisation by establishing a unique environment defined by the historic character and sense of local identity that it signifies. Revitalisation can only happen through change and renewal, allowing the historic environment to adapt and integrate with the new. There are numerous ways in which historic buildings can be reused and much can be achieved through the skills of a sensitive and imaginative designer and equally imaginative means of financing projects.

Historic towns and places are continuously changing and evolving to meet the needs of contemporary society. Nonetheless, historic places are valuable assets and any new interventions in the historic fabric of a city must:

- Be based on an understanding of the historic town, its morphological and social development;
- Respect the setting and landscape;
- Be appropriate in scale, height and volume to the inherent morphology of the townscape;
- In design, respect existing characteristics of the townscape and contribute to it rather than mimic or compete with the existing.

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